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Overture to Albania

While the spotlight has been focused on the Kremlin's relations with Western Europe, the new Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov, has been quietly trying to secure a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean. What has U.S. Kremlin-watchers biting their nails is the warm message of congratulations sent to Albania by Andropov last November on the 38th anniversary of the little country's liberation from Italian-German occupation.

Andropov proposed "honest, equal and mutually beneficial" relations. Discounting typical communist rhetorical flourishes, it was a remarkable overture for the ruler of the mighty Soviet Union to make toward a poverty-stricken nation of 2.5 million.

But there's no doubt that Andropov would love to bury the hatchet with Enver Hoxha, the 74-year-old dictator who has ruled Albania since 1944. There are two reasons: the deep-water ports of Durres and Vlore on the Adriatic. The Soviet navy was kicked out of the two bases in 1960, when Hoxha broke relations with the Kremlin in a fit of Marxist pique over Nikita Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign.

Fortunately for American strategic interests, the prospect of the Soviet navy's return is probably remote, at least as long as Hoxha survives. And though a secret State Department report has him in "deteriorating health [with] advanced diabetes and a debilitating circulatory problem," he is a tough old buzzard.

In fact, it is Hoxha's toughness that will likely cause him to spurn Andropov's friendly advances.

Unless Andropov shows that he is a neo-Stalinist, his chances of winning Hoxha over with sweet talk and economic aid are probably no better than Khrushchev's or Leonid Brezhnev's.

Like Stalin in his final years, Hoxha is "an increasingly paranoid and doctrinaire despot," according to the State Department study. He is "possessed by his role as 'father of the new Albania.'" Following his revered mentor's bloody example, Hoxha "orders purges the way other people order pizza," in the words of one Albania-watcher.

Hoxha's xenophobia may be as much ethnic Albanian as ideological communist. He broke with the Kremlin over its "betrayal" of his personal idol, Stalin. He forged close ties to Red China as the keeper of the Stalinist faith—and then broke them when the current leadership turned on Mao Tse-tung and sought rapprochement with the United States.

So while Hoxha continues to have "an almost paranoid fear of the Soviet Union," as one CIA report puts it, this should hardly be taken as encouragement for any U.S. overtures to Albania. If he rejects Andropov's song of reconciliation, as seems probable, his rejection of any friendly advances from the West is a dead certainty.

Still, Hoxha can't live forever. U.S. policy analysts are right to be concerned with Albania's life after Hoxha. Andropov might have greater success with the Albanian dictator's successors.

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